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ABSTRACT

More employers have mobilized to support career academies. They say that in addition to improving student engagement in school, academies help to strengthen relationships among business leaders, educators, and civic leaders; prevent high risk students from dropping out; and expand their pipeline of qualified workers. Academic research has helped accelerate employer involvement in academies. A study shows academies improve students' high school completion rates and grade point averages, increase their probability of attending college and improve their academic knowledge and skills. Researchers say many positive outcomes stem from the personal attention students receive--easier transitions, better attendance and graduations, and more motivation. Initiatives succeed only when they are well implemented. Academies must have teachers, school administrators, and employers able to work cooperatively. Many try to overcome an initial sense of mutual distrust between school systems and the business community by hiring intermediary organizations to coordinate services. Support for academies is growing, but these challenges still exist: to align them with the standards movement; to convince educators, parents, and students that academies are rigorous academic and work-based programs, not traditional vocational programs; to provide professional development for school staffs; and to get businesses to view participation as a strategic, "bottom-line" issue. (YLB)

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Lindsay Weil

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Employer Involvement in Career Academies: Old Model Sparks New Involvement

By Lindsay Weil, *National Alliance of Business*

When J. Lee Everett, Chairman of the Philadelphia Electric Company, and Bill Mobraataan, Chief Executive Officer of BellSouth Philadelphia, formed the Academy of Applied Electrical Science at Edison High School, they were trying to address a local educational and workforce development crisis in Philadelphia. The inner-city riots of the 1960's had left the city in disarray, and unemployment and high school dropout rates were at an all time high.

Both business leaders thought the Academy of Applied Electrical Science would represent a small step forward in helping to reverse these dismal trends. They hypothesized that, if employers partnered with educators to create a small learning community in which students shared the same teachers and classes, offered youth a chance to take curriculum centered on a career theme, supplied internships for students, and promised students employment upon graduation, then youth would be more motivated to stay in school and remain employed. In addition, they believed that this Career Academy model would provide broad information about an industry, highlighting for students the variety of careers in a given field, and would help form a foundation on which students could build more advanced skills.

What Everett and Mobraataan couldn't have realized at the time was that their innovative "academy" model would garner so much employer support. Thirty-three years later, Career Academies have multiplied exponentially. Today there are Career Academies in a wide range of industries with many world renowned employers such as AAA, Adobe, American Express, Aramark, Cigna, Cingular Wireless, Citigroup, First Union, IBM, Lazzard LLC, Mariott, Merill Lynch, PriceWaters Coopers, Sunoco, United Airlines, US Airways, and Verizon.

These businesses serve on advisory boards, provide direct financial assistance, offer advice on curriculum and program design, and engage students in work-based learning activities such as internships, mock interviews, field trips and career days.

Employers say these efforts not only benefit students but also the community at large. "Career Academies give students a focus for their future careers," says John K. Leonard, the former President of Cigna Group. "They also make local communities a better place to live. In addition, they add to the pool of potential employees."

THE CASE FOR CAREER ACADEMIES

Over the past several years, an increasing number of employers have mobilized to support Career Academies. According to recent assessments, not only is a majority of American youth failing to meet the nation's standards of academic proficiency, but U.S. students also continue to lag behind their international peers in key subjects such as science, mathematics, and reading skills.

For example, in 2000, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) conducted a national assessment of fourth, eighth, and twelfth-grade students in mathematics and science. The results of these three assessments showed that only a slim proportion of American students perform up to the minimum expected level of achievement, called "proficient."

Only 26% of 4th graders, 27% of 8th graders, and 17% of 12th graders scored proficient or higher on

the mathematics assessment. 29% of 4th graders, 32% of 8th graders, and 18% of 12th graders scored proficient or higher on the science assessment. 68% of 4th grade students scored at a basic or below basic level on the reading assessment.

Many companies believe that, if students were more engaged in school their academic performance would improve. They say academies give students the opportunity to see the relevance of what they are learning. Work-based learning experiences make learning more interactive and exciting. As a result students become more engaged in school.

"Given all of the dire statistics we are familiar with, we need to do something to get students engaged and interested in learning, and to help all students reach high standards," says Michael Schmidt, External Education Program Manager, Ford Motor Company Fund. "Career Academies give students the academic as well as the 'soft skills' – teamwork, problem solving, communication, critical thinking – that businesses (and by the way, colleges) demand. Traditional schools are not preparing students in these areas, and that's where Career Academies can make a huge difference." Schmidt manages the Ford Academy of Manufacturing Sciences (FAMS) program.

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES, PROMOTING ALTRUISM

Business leaders say Career Academies do more than just improve student engagement in school. They also help to strengthen relationships between business leaders, educators, and civic leaders in local communities.

"The bottom-line is that Career Academies help build social capital. They provide a learning experience for everyone involved. Students learn about the business world by working at the elbows of employees. Community leaders and business people, for their part, get first hand experience about what the world of education is like," says Anna Siegler, Manager of Community Relations at Nuveen Investments. "If you can bring industry leaders in a city together to support Academy programs, the whole is bigger than the sum of the parts – that is, the program takes on more momentum."

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

Many employers believe Academies are particularly helpful in preventing high-risk students from dropping out. According to Paul Hasney, Senior Vice President of Corporate Education of Hibernia Bank in Louisiana, only 20% of high school graduates go on to college in New Orleans.

"This means 80% of high school graduates need some sort of skills. Career Academies are a great way of enhancing these students knowledge base," Hasney remarks. Hasney's bank runs a unique summer internship program for juniors and seniors. From 8:00 to 9:15 in the morning, students go to class. After their class they intern at a Hibernia Bank from 9:30 – 4:00pm where they learn about accounting, human resources, and finance operations. After they complete their internship, students receive 6 hours of college credits from a local community college.

Hasney says these activities are beneficial to youth because most high school students have not given much thought to what they might study in college or what careers they might pursue. He says, "Career Academies help students understand what their career interests are." They also "enable students to have more choices after they leave high school."

EXPANDING THE POOL OF POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES

Companies also view academies as a vehicle to expand their own pipeline of qualified workers. Over the past 20 years, employers have become increasingly concerned that the American labor force may not have the skills that the current marketplace demands. Many industry associations, like the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM),

regularly report serious skills gaps. In a 2001 survey of their members, 80% of NAM members said they have a moderate to serious shortage of qualified job candidates.

"Career Academies give business an opportunity to get their hands around public education," says Robb Fox, an environmental lawyer at Manko, Gold, Katcher& Fox LLP in Philadelphia. "It provides business with a better-trained and better-able workforce."

Fox provides students involved in the Environmental Technology Academy with internships, mock interviews, and career fairs.

Most companies believe that activities like the ones in which Fox participates help to generate a larger pool of qualified workers.

"Students that we hire have been very successful on the job," says James Donaghy, Director of Operations and Landscape Management for the Fairmount Park Commission and Chairman of the Horticulture Academy in Philadelphia. "They tend to advance more quickly when given opportunities for promotion."

A PROVEN TRACK RECORD OF SUCCESS

Academic research on career academies has helped accelerate employer involvement in Career Academies. In their study "*Career Academy Programs in California: Outcomes and Implementation*", researchers Nan Maxwell and Victor Rubin concluded that Career Academies improved students' high school completion rates, improved grade point averages, increased students' probability of attending college, and increased students' academic knowledge and skills compared to those of other high school students.

Researchers studying Career Academies say that many of the positive outcomes stem from the personal attention students receive at academies.

According to Melinda Mechur Karp at the Institute on Education and the Economy, at Teachers College at Columbia University, the effects are likely a result of "the small learning environment of most academies, as well as the fact that many academy teachers are extremely dedicated and focused on students." She adds that "career oriented courses seem to 'draw the students in' to their academic coursework; this seems to allow them to feel invested in school."

Karp believes that other positive outcomes – easier transitions, better attendance and graduations, and more motivation – stem from this sense of feeling connected "Our fieldwork seemed to confirm this; many teachers commented on the ways in which giving students a 'hook' into school allowed them to succeed in other areas," she says.

Longitudinal studies by The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), a non-profit research organization in New York City, have had similar findings. For students, higher levels of interpersonal supports and increased participation in career awareness enhanced student motivation and long-term educational and career goals. At-risk participants in the academies had better attendance and lower dropout rates than control group students. A follow-up study in early 2002 showed, however, that the advantages to the academy students had largely disappeared by the fourteenth month following their scheduled high school graduation.

These results make some critics skeptical about academies. Many still argue that Career Academies induce college-bound students who are attracted to the programs to substitute career and technical classes and work experience for academic classes and experiences that would qualify them for college.

But stakeholders directly involved in academies say that these data don't reflect the reality for most academy students. According to John Ferrandino, the President of the National Academy Foundation (NAF), a New York City-based organization that

runs more than 500 academies nationwide, "Data collected from NAF Academies indicates that four out of five Academy students pursue higher education. In addition, preliminary results from a study completed by the Institute on Education and the Economy at Teachers College, Columbia University, indicate that Academy students are more prepared for college, and complete four-year degrees at a higher-rate than non Academy students from the same schools: almost half of Academy alumni received a bachelor's degree or higher; significantly higher than the national average."

Charles Dayton, a Career Academy expert, points out "every survey conducted has shown that both students and teachers prefer the academy structure to the traditional high school structure. Teachers like the academy structure because it gives them more control over the learning environment, the ability to be more effective. Students like the increased relevancy." Dayton, who is now the coordinator of the Career Academy Support Network, an organization based at the University of California, Berkeley says, "Given the sense of alienation many students have, improved satisfaction with high school is a worthwhile end in itself," he says.

Constance Majka, Director of Public Relations and National Partnerships for Philadelphia Academies, Inc. agrees. "I have been working with the Philadelphia Academies for about 13 years. I have read data, I have seen statistics, and I have heard all about the 'magic' of academies and have seen people try to dissect them. And what I have found and what I believe is that the 'magic' of academies is making a human connection – when those people start to think of 'those kids' as 'Our kids' it changes everything. And no standardized test or survey – that I've seen – has been able to measure that."

Michael Schmidt also concurs. "Anyone who has ever worked with students in a Career Academy can see the dramatic changes that take place. Students are more mature, more self-assured, focused and confident. They have some long-range goals and know what they need to do to attain them. When we surveyed our FAMS alumni in 1998, we saw very high numbers of students (95%+) say that their experience with FAMS was a big help with preparing them for success at college. These kinds of changes are not measured by the usual educational benchmarks."

INITIATIVES ARE ONLY AS GOOD AS THEY ARE WELL-IMPLEMENTED

But successful Career Academies are not built overnight. David Stern, a professor at the University California at Berkeley says they "take commitment from teachers, school administration, and local employers partners. Underestimating the necessary commitment leads to half-baked programs."

Career Academies must have teachers, school administrators, and employers who are able to work cooperatively together.

Yet school systems and the business community must often overcome an initial sense of mutual mistrust. "School people see the business community as critics who really don't understand the complexities of the education business. The business community sees school systems as bureaucratic entities that are ineffective, inefficient and have no real accountability," says Ferrandino. "Developing a trusting symbiotic relationship between the two sectors is a major challenge."

Many Career Academies are working to overcome this challenge by hiring intermediary organizations to coordinate services. Intermediary organizations connect schools, workplaces, and other community resources to better prepare students for advanced education and careers. They also convene key stakeholders, broker services, measure outcomes to ensure the quality and impact of their efforts, and disseminate effective practice.

Experts say that intermediaries are critical to implementing and sustaining partnerships. The research conducted by Melinda Mechur Karp and her col-

leagues Katherine L. Hughes and Margaret Terry Orr indicates that Career Academies that are part of intermediary networks or that employ designated academy coordinators "seemed to be more successful in maintaining their employer involvement, because a coordinator was able to deal with the school bureaucracy, address employer concerns in a timely manner, and mediate between the school culture and the business culture." They also found that "Where teachers were expected to build partnerships on their own, the time required to do so effectively was often too much for them, and the business side was lost in the demands of running the school-based component of the academy."

CRITICAL ISSUES FOR THE FUTURE

While support for Career Academies is growing, many challenges still exist.

On the education side, the biggest challenge is to align Career Academies with the standards movement. The recent "No Child Left Behind legislation" puts in place a number of measures designed to hold states and schools more accountable for student progress. Specifically, the Act mandates by the 2005-2006 school year, states begin testing students in grades 3-8 annually in reading and mathematics. The law requires states to bring all students to the proficient level within 12 years. It also requires individual schools to meet "adequate yearly progress" targets towards this goal. If a school fails to meet its target two years in a row, its students must be offered a chance to attend another public school.

Both employers and educators worry that Career Academies have not done a sufficient job of explicitly linking their project-based curriculum with State Standards.

Michael Schmidt comments that, "Career Academy programs must take the time and energy to show how their programs help kids meet high standards, pass standardized tests, go to college." He says "In the end, these are the things that drive teachers, principals, students, and parents to do anything at the high school level. The 'career' aspects are important, but alone have limited appeal to these audiences. You simply must have the 'academic/standards' side as well, or these programs will always be seen as 'for kids who don't go to college.'"

Schmidt believes linking Career Academies to the standards movement is a realistic goal. Already, his academy writes all of its lesson plans with explicit links to the standards they are meeting. He says, "There is a myth in education that project based activities and other Career Academy-style curricular approaches can not align with standards. This is absolutely not true, but lots of people still believe it. We in this movement need to more actively and vocally prove this myth wrong."

Stakeholders need to convince educators, parents, and students that Career Academies are not "traditional vocational programs" but rather are rigorous academic and work-based programs that prepare students for their future, including attending college or other post secondary education.

Grace Sammon, co-founder of the National Career Academy Coalition and who now works nationally with GMS Partners, Inc. on developing effective high school reforms says it is critically important that school staffs have the professional development opportunities that provide them with the resources and experiences that support reforms. "Their ability to partner with, learn from, and share with business is beneficial to the successful preparation of students as they transition to post-secondary opportunities," says Sammon, who authored *Creating and Sustaining Small Learning Communities: A Practitioners Guide to Career Academies and Other Small Learning Communities.* "These professional development opportunities can provide the key elements of rigor, relevance, relationships and results. In a career academy these opportunities and experiences are essential."

In the days of corporate buyouts and other staff-reducing activities, it will become more difficult for Career Academies to remain a high priority for companies. Experts say the major cost for business is in people's time and energy. Already, current employees are doing the jobs of 2 or 3 people.

Schmidt points out that, "Businesses are often resistant to taking the time to do things that are not business-related because they feel they simply do not have the time to give."

However, he says, "If we can get businesses to view their participation in these activities as a strategic, 'bottom-line' issue, then we can really move the curve on overall employer participation. Altruism alone is not enough to keep employers committed over the long haul."

Even with these challenges, employers remain committed for the future. As John Ferrandino points out, "Our experience at NAF is that, once engaged, business together with schools 'own' the Career Academy, and then it is truly successful. This is different than the 'adopt-a-school' model that is often too public relations-focused and never really involves the business people with individual students."

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